

## Rise 234

### Chapter 234: Leaving Xiahe Village on Horseback

The Laba Festival, a time of celebration, brings joy to the whole world, and a lone horse ventures down the river.

The Shamat black horse, on its first long journey, gallops through the cold wind, its spirited hooves thundering as tufts of black fur parting across its forehead sway in the wind.

The winding village road stretches irregularly beneath the hooves...

"Hey, Zhu Ping'an, why are you sneaking off like that? Hee-hee, you look like a stray dog."

At a crossroads just outside the village, Li Shu, cloaked in a red cape, quietly appeared, riding her horse. Her flowing cloak swirled in the wind, and her slightly tilted face revealed a fair neck, her large eyes gleaming with mischief.

Behind her, the little bun-faced maid, Hua'er, with a puffed-up skirt, was panting as she chased after her young mistress.

"In broad daylight, how is it sneaky? Are you here to send me off?" Zhu Ping'an stopped the Shamat black horse, looked at the scheming girl Li Shu, and asked with a smile, curling his lips.

"Dream on! Who's sending you off? I came to walk the horse. From far away, I saw a toad sitting on a horse's back. It looked familiar, so I came to take a look."

The cunning girl Li Shu rolled her eyes in disdain, firmly denying it, pouting as she spoke.

"A toad? Heh, are you wishing me good luck like the toad in the Moon Palace?" Zhu Ping'an shook his head with a slight smile.

"Truly shameless, still talking about the Moon Palace. I saw you sneaking around, clearly afraid of being laughed at by the villagers if you fail the exam. You'll probably leave the capital the same way, sneaking around quietly."

Li Shu's big, shining eyes gazed at Zhu Ping'an with a hint of mockery in them, her rosy lips curling with a smile.

"Well, let's wait and see."

Zhu Ping'an patted the Shamat black horse and once again set off on his journey to take the imperial examination.

At the crossroads, Li Shu kept watching as Zhu Ping'an's figure disappeared into the distance before turning her horse around and leading the little bun-faced maid, Hua'er, back to Shanghe Village.

Kaoshan Town. Anyone who has been here knows that the place is surrounded by mountains, with one barren village after another growing at the foot of these mountains. Once off the main road, the mountain paths become more difficult to navigate, uneven and full of rocks, presenting an irregular shape. Along the way, people continue their repetitive life dance of working from sunrise to sunset in this irregular world.

The Shamat black horse, full of energy, crossed Kaoshan Town's mountain city by noon, passing five or six villages. It stopped briefly at the foot of a mountain with a stream running through it.

Zhu Pingan unloaded the things from the horse's back, tied the Shamat black horse to a tree, letting it rest and eat some dry grass. He found a sheltered spot, leaned against a rock, and took out the pancakes his mother, Chen, had made, eating them with some pickled vegetables.

The sun wasn't great, as clouds were slowly approaching. This area's riverbanks were covered with dry grass, and in the distance, a shepherd boy was herding sheep home for lunch, accompanied by a big yellow dog. The dog happily barked behind the flock of sheep, who, having grazed on the dried grass, shook their bellies in satisfaction as they followed their little master home.

After eating two pancakes, Zhu Ping'an fed the Shamat black horse some more dry grass, loaded the things back onto the horse's back, and continued on his way.

In the cold winter, the small stones on the road were frozen hard. When the hooves of the Shamat black horse, with its horseshoes, stepped on them, they made a crisp sound as they broke. The horse seemed to find this amusing, choosing to walk only on the broken stones, just to hear the sound. This caused Zhu Ping'an, riding on its back, to be jolted uncontrollably.

Several times, Zhu Ping'an had to pull on the reins to correct the horse's behavior.

This was Zhu Ping'an's first real solo journey, completely arranged by himself. Lacking experience, he didn't know much about the road conditions ahead and, by evening, missed a mountain village. He rode for another seven or eight miles and saw no villages at all.

Before he knew it, the setting sun had already dipped below the western mountains, setting the mountain ridges ablaze with red, and the clouds above had turned color as well.

Looking around, the mountains were layered upon one another, and there was no sign of life. The only thing in sight was a mountain road stretching ahead, disappearing into the distance.

The Shamat Black Horse was exhausted, and its strength had waned from the long journey, causing its pace to slow considerably. This made Zhu Ping'an give up on the idea of returning to the village he had passed after Eight Li.

Riding on the horse, Zhu Ping'an looked around. The mountains were dense and endless. Just when he was starting to feel disheartened, he spotted what appeared to be a small house at the foot of a mountain on the left side of the mountain path, about fifty meters away. He dismounted and led the Shamat Black Horse down the mountain road, following a barely visible path toward the small house.

As he got closer, he could see that the house seemed to be a simple shelter temporarily used by mountain hunters. It was primarily made of wood and straw, somewhat resembling the makeshift shelter where the young scholar had been kidnapped by the demon woman Ruonan, but this one seemed slightly better.

"Excuse me, is anyone here?" Zhu Ping'an called out loudly, cupping his hands outside the door.

No one responded. Zhu Ping'an asked three more times loudly, but still received no answer. It seemed that the shelter hadn't been inhabited for some time, and likely, the hunters didn't come here often.

Zhu Ping'an led the Shamat Black Horse to the door, unlocked the bolt, and pushed it open. The interior was relatively clean but also looked like it hadn't been lived in for a while.

Zhu Ping'an led the Shamat Black Horse inside, tying it to a pillar. Then, he unloaded the items from the horse's back and placed them on the straw bed in the shelter. He then searched the shelter for a sickle, took it outside, and used it to gather some dry grass from the surroundings. He brought the grass back to the shelter to use as fodder for the Shamat Black Horse, repeating this three times.

The shelter was relatively well-equipped with living necessities, including a hanging iron pot and some firewood, rice, oil, and salt. Zhu Ping'an made use of them temporarily, picking up some more firewood and dry grass from outside. He then took the iron pot to a small stream not far behind the house, broke the ice with stones, washed the pot with the stream water, and then filled the pot with cold stream water, carrying it back into the shelter.

He cooked rice, started a fire, and prepared food, making roasted cakes.

The fragrant millet porridge, accompanied by pickled cucumbers made by his mother, Chen, was a true delight after a day of traveling. After finishing the meal, he poured the remaining millet porridge into a basin and carried it over to the Shamat Black Horse, offering it some warm water to drink.

Afterward, Zhu Ping'an tidied up the bed, adding more straw, and then spread out the bedding he had brought on top of the straw. He closed the shelter's door from the inside, securing the bolt.

After a whole day of traveling, though he had been riding, he was still very tired. Fortunately, his mother, Chen, had made a rabbit fur cushion for the saddle, preventing it from chafing his legs.

However, despite being tired, Zhu Ping'an didn't immediately rest. As usual, he prepared to read for a while before going to sleep.

He started a fire in the shelter, adding both thick and thin firewood. The flames burned brightly, providing light and warmth.

Zhu Ping'an sat in front of the fire, holding a book, and read intently by the firelight. The fire crackled, and the warmth spread, making Zhu Ping'an hum contentedly. He adjusted to a more comfortable position and continued reading.

After adding firewood twice, Zhu Ping'an put the book away, preparing to rest. He moved the straw and firewood away from the fire to eliminate any safety hazards before getting into bed.

Lying on the bed, he faced the window, with a clear view of the outside.

The clouds covered the moon, and the path was deserted, leaving an indescribable sense of loneliness.